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ABSTRACT

This study examined immigrant parents' role in their young children's language learning and development in linguistically different contexts. At home, participating children lived with parents who spoke little or no English and various other languages. At school, children were taught mostly by English speaking teachers, with occasional teacher aides who spoke another language. The study used five data collection instruments: a parent questionnaire on attitudes and preferences toward English and the mother tongue; an activity chart; audio recordings of parent-child linguistic interactions; an observation checklist to collect information on home language use; and parent interviews to clarify data collected using the other methods. Results indicated that parents' attitudes toward language in general, parents' interest in both the mother tongue and English, joint parent-child activities, and direct linguistic exchange between children and parents were important factors in supporting immigrant children's language learning. Parents wanted their children to be proficient in both languages. There was little coordination between the home and school in terms of spontaneous linguistic experiences. Considerable school support was available for the immigrant children and parents to learn English. (Contains 29 references.) (SM)

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# Acquisition of Multiple Languages Among Children of Immigrant Families: Parents' Role in the Home-School Language Pendulum

## Supporting Immigrant Children's Language Learning

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**Abstract**

This study examined immigrant parents' role in their young children's language learning and development in linguistically different contexts in Chicago. At home the children lived with parents who spoke little or no English. At school the children were taught by mostly English speaking teachers, occasionally with teacher aides who spoke some of the other languages the children understood.

Five data collection instruments were used in the study: a parent questionnaire, an activity chart, audio recorders, an observation guide during home visits and parent interviews. The parent interviews were conducted towards the end of the study as a means to triangulate information and to crosscheck and clarify meanings of the data from the other instruments.

Parents' attitudes towards language in general, parents' interest in both mother tongue and English, joint parent-child activities and direct, linguistic exchange between child and parent featured as important factors supporting the immigrant children's language learning.

## 1. Introduction

Despite the fact that most of the world's population learns and functions in two or more languages (Crystal, 1987: 360), second language learning has been a topic of controversy in many countries, and especially the United States (Piper, 1998). While young children acquiring two or more languages simultaneously tend to speak both with good fluency by the early primary years, second language learning is perceived as particularly challenging to both teachers and learners.

In countries where acquisition of multiple languages is an expected phenomenon, it is understood that children can learn more than one language and use all of them effectively. In Tanzania for example, young children are exposed to at least two languages within the family, Kiswahili and another language. If parents speak different ethnic languages their children are exposed to three languages from birth. When the children start schooling, Kiswahili is emphasized as the medium of instruction and English is introduced as a subject. To some educators this may sound as "confusing the child", but it is the reality of the sociolinguistic demands of the Tanzanian context. By the end of primary years, children function effectively in three or more languages.

When immigrant children start schooling in the United States they get exposed to English in formal and informal situations by teachers and peers. However, further exposure to their native languages may not be available outside their families. The children then "swing" between English at school and their native language at

home, on a daily basis. If the immigrant parents do not understand English they feel challenged in their role to help their children acquire both languages.

The current study reports the role of immigrant parents in supporting their young children's language acquisition given the home-school language pendulum. The research process involved 32 immigrant families in Chicago, with children ranging from 18 months to five years. This age group was important because children needed language more and more to get their needs met, especially with the introduction of schooling and other activities outside the home. The study investigated immigrant parents' strategies used to help their young children to cope with the linguistically alternating settings of mother tongue at home and English at school on a daily basis. The researcher also explored problems faced by teachers of these children.

**2. Conceptual Framework**

The researcher approached the study from four main perspectives supported by current research on language acquisition. These were as follows:

a. children identify language sounds very early in their lives

b. receptive language skills precede productive language skills

c. learning two languages simultaneously is more effective than learning them successively

d. the skepticism of childhood bilingualism.

Explication of the Conceptual Framework:

*a. Early identification of language sounds*

Research evidence suggests that young children perceive language differently from other sounds. Newborn babies were found to display more activity in the left side of their brains when they heard language, and more activity on the right side of their brains when they heard music (Molfese, Freeman, and Palemo, 1975). This "natural inclination" to language is in line with the perception that children are "wired" for language (Chomsky, 1968; Hockett, 1960). The environment provides the linguistic contexts that are necessary for realizing the language acquisition potential. The nativist perspective is inadequate explanation for language acquisition and development. Other theoretical approaches to understanding language acquisition, i.e., behaviorist, cognitive, pragmatic, social interactionist and information processing interpretations have suggested other reasonably sound approaches that focus more on the phenotype (genetics and environment) rather than the genotype (genetics alone).

While theoretical approaches will continue to be debated, practical observations of the factors affecting children's learning of two or more languages are of more interest to researchers, teachers and parents. Research has documented strategies such as scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1987), "expansion" and "recasts" (Berk

1999:360), "expansion" and "extension" (Hulit & Howard, 1997: 149) to help children in their process of language acquisition. While these strategies help children use words and sentence structures they learn, they are not universal (Marcus, 1993; Valian, 1993), yet all typically developing children experience strong urge to communicate and be socially connected.

It is not surprising that in some cultures linguistic interaction occurs even with newborn babies, who cannot understand the language but react to it in certain noticeable ways. It is documented that linguistic interaction, especially in the form of conversation is consistently related to language progress in early childhood (Hart & Ridley, 1995; McCartney, 1984). Psycholinguists have found that babies are quite competent in perceiving speech sounds. Within the first few months babies were found to be able to distinguish among some consonant and vowel sounds, intonations, pitch, and loudness (Trehub, 1976, Morse, 1972; Bench, 1969; Bridger, 1961).

Brain research suggests that the more a child is stimulated by linguistic input the more the brain strengthens synaptic connections and axon myelinization for language development (Johnson, 1998). Neurons that are rarely stimulated lose their connective fibers (axons and dendrites) thus reducing the number of synapses ("Synaptic pruning") (Berk, 1999: 297). Linguistic interaction at an early age is therefore important for cognitive development, including acquisition of language. When the social context demands more than one language, the

social context tends to provide support for acquiring the languages. When the social context is focused on one language, for example, English, the other languages desired will be more difficult to acquire. Positive parents' attitudes and efforts to help their children learn the languages will be necessary.

*b. Receptive Language skills come before productive language skills*

Research has shown that children acquire the receptive skills of language before they acquire the productive skills (Krashen, 1981, 1982; Ingram, 1975; Piaget, 1966). This means that children hear and attach meanings to words before they can pronounce them. The two processes, i.e. comprehension and production, support each other. For example, if a child is able to ask "when", the child certainly has acquired a sense of time. Interaction with other people is necessary if a young child is to hear words and attach some meanings to them. Parents and teachers help fulfil this role. When the language of the home and the language of the school are completely different, both parents and teachers find it more difficult to fulfil their roles.

Children develop "perceptual maps" that direct them towards the sounds of the languages they hear most frequently, and away from the sounds of other languages they don't hear as often (Newberger, 1997:24). Naming things and actions at home or at school will influence the words, phrases and the meanings a child picks up. Young children are bombarded with toys and materials to interact with. Coming from another country where manufactured toys may either

be different or non-existent, immigrant parents may face challenge helping their children to interact with toys, given the language barrier. What type of activities do immigrant parents engage in jointly with their young children? How is this related to linguistic production of their children?

*c. Simultaneous versus Successive Second Language Learning*

Within the same time frame as it takes monolingual children to learn one language, children in truly bilingual contexts learn two languages, and are able to use them appropriately in the social context. Learning two languages at the same time is definitely more complex than learning just one. However, due to the support for both languages within the social context it is possible and almost natural to acquire both languages effectively. Young children in truly bilingual settings get help and support to learn the languages spontaneously and effectively within their everyday functioning. This model is not available for immigrant children diffusing themselves into a predominantly English speaking society. These children have to learn English after the mother tongue has been acquired. The process of learning the second language successively necessitates parental and school support.

*d. The skepticism of multiple languages*

Although the number of children who grow up learning two languages may be just as high as that of monolingual children, childhood bilingualism is poorly understood by many educators and regarded with skepticism by others

(Genesee, 1997). More importantly, the term "bilingual children" has carried different meanings in different contexts. This phrase is often misused to mean "children who already speak their mother tongue fluently, but are only beginning to learn another language", often times, English. This can be a misleading interpretation of bilingualism. To be ***bilingual,*** one has to ***speak two languages fluently enough to be understood.*** Individuals who ***cannot speak fluently in any language*** are ***semilinguals*** (Piper, 1993), while individuals who are already fluent in one language and are trying to learn a "second" language are ***second*** or ***foreign language learners***, depending on the socio-linguistic context (Berns, 1990; Mushi, 1996). If the new language being learned *is spontaneously accessible within the socio-linguistic context*, then it is being learned as a *second language*. If the language being learned is used only in specific contexts like the classroom or the legal system, or the medical system or in businesses then the language is being learned as a *foreign language*. In other words a second language is spontaneously available in the surrounding environment, while a foreign language is not.

Some educators may believe that learning two languages at the same time confuses the child and delays language development. In fact, simultaneous second language learning has been found to be natural and children become quite proficient by the end of pre-school years (Arnberg, 1987). Children exposed to two or more languages at the same time can simultaneously achieve native speaker competence in all three languages (Hoffman, 1985). This is because in simultaneous second language learning the child's brain develops new synaptic connections to accommodate structures of the three languages at

the same time. This reduces the possibility that one language will be processed using the rules and structure of another language (previously acquired). As mentioned earlier, when the two or more languages are learned successively, the child will need organized help at home and at school to learn the new language.

Several other claims have been made about speaking "another language", associating it with delays in acquisition of English. Successive second language learning may not necessarily be delayed, if the "interlanguage" (second language produced with interference from the rules of the mother tongue already acquired) is used as a stepping stone for effective communication during the process of learning the rules and structure of the second language. If the "interlanguage" is discouraged or suppressed, then the second language becomes more difficult to learn because the child has no other linguistic foundation to support it.

Immigrant families may encourage their children to begin speaking English as early as possible after coming into the United States. Likewise, caregivers and teachers may struggle to communicate to the children in English, with little initial success. However, little has been done to better understand how an adult can prompt a child in a new linguistic context to make effort to speak in the new language.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study were:

(i) How do immigrant parents' attitudes towards their mother tongue compare with their attitudes towards English?

(ii) What languages other than English do teachers of young children deal with directly or indirectly in trying to understand the children and help them learn effectively?

(iii) What types of activities do immigrant parents use to promote their children's development of language?

(iv) How does the school connect to the family to promote language learning among the immigrant children?

(v) What types of support does the school provide the immigrant families to promote their children's communication using English and learning in general?

(vi) How sensitive are immigrant parents to the support provided by the school, given the language barrier?

## 3. Methods and Procedures

Sampling

The participants of the study constituted a convenient sample. The researcher involved as many immigrant parents as she could find, who had children between eighteen months and five years. Given the type of the study sample, generalizability of the findings is limited. However, the study highlights issues that might apply to immigrant families in similar contexts.

Instrumentation

The researcher developed and used five instruments: a parents' questionnaire, audio-recording, a chart to tap relevant Interactions between parents/caregivers and the children, an observation checklist which was used during home visits, as well as parent interviews. The questionnaire collected information on parents' attitudes, preferences and attitudes towards English and the mother tongue. Audio recording provided information on parent-child linguistic interactions, while the activity charts were used to record clues that tended to lead to uttering a new word in English. New words in the child's first language were also recorded, together with the clues that prompted them. Parents and caregivers were trained on how to record the interactions highlighting any clues that prompted the child to utter the English words. The observation checklist used during home visits

collected information on the use of English and the use of mother tongue. Parent interviews helped the researcher clarify her observations as a way to crosscheck meanings with the parents. This helped to ensure internal validity of the study.

Triangulation of Data

The researcher pooled together the data collected using the five different ways in order to assess convergence of the findings. For example, data from the parents' questionnaire were compared to the interview responses and observations to determine how closely the data indicated similar results. When the different sets of data seemed to give conflicting messages, the parent interviews came to the rescue. The interviews revealed additional information that helped the researcher make logical sense of the five sets of data.

Quantitative data processing

The numbers of instances of parent child interactions, parents utterances, child utterances, and new words acquired in English and in mother tongue were correlated using Quattro Pro spreadsheet to determine any linear relationships.

Content analysis of qualitative data

Qualitative data from the parent's questionnaire, audio-recording, observation and interviews was analyzed to extract themes related to language learning in the alternating settings, home and school. The themes specified were: attitudes of parents towards English and their mother tongue, spontaneous linguistic interaction with their children, connecting school and home linguistic activities, and school support. Another theme emerged later, which was immigrant parent sensitivity to school support.

## 4. Study Findings

The findings of the study are organized in six sections:

(i) Parents' Attitudes towards English and mother tongue

(ii) A language profile of the groups studied

(iii) Immigrant parents' interaction with their children

(iv) Spontaneous interaction at home and school-home linguistic coordination

(v) School support

(vi) Parent sensitivity to school support

### *(1) Parents' Attitudes Towards English and Mother Tongue*

Among the 42 toddlers and preschoolers studied, 37 of them came from families that valued the mother tongue as highly as English. Parents' average ratings of English versus mother tongue on a scale of **1=lowest**, **4= highest** were 3.7 and 3.2, respectively, indicating that parents wanted their children to be proficient in both English and their mother tongue, with slightly more preference for English. Figure 1 presents this information pictorially.

Figure 1 about here

Parents' attitudes towards English and mother tongue (L1) were compared to children's actual abilities to speak the languages. Although 95.25% of the parents indicated they wanted their children to speak English very well, only 61.91% thought their children could speak English very well. Table 1 presents this information. However, comparison of audio-recordings to the parents' attitudes and ratings of their children's ability to speak English did not match. It seemed that parents overestimated their children's proficiency in English. Listening to the audio tapes indicated that the children seemed to struggle with English much harder than the parents indicated. The parents thought their children were more fluent in English than the children actually were.

**TABLE 1**
**PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENGLISH AND L1 COMPARED TO THEIR PERCEIVED ABILITIES OF THE CHILDREN TO SPEAK THE LANUGEAGES**

| Question | Very Well | About Average | Only a Little | Not at All | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. How well do you want your child to speak your first language (mother tongue/L1)? | 19<br>90.48% | 1<br>4.76% | 1<br>4.76% | 0<br>0% | 21<br>100% |
| 2. How well do you want your child to speak English? | 20<br>95.24% | 0<br>0% | 1<br>4.8% | 0<br>0% | 21<br>100% |
| 3. How well can your child speak your first language? | 6<br>28.57% | 14<br>66.67% | 1<br>4.76% | 0<br>0% | 21<br>100% |
| 4. How well can your child speak English? | 13<br>61.91% | 7<br>33.33% | 0<br>0% | 1<br>4.76% | 21<br>100% |

***(ii) Language Profile***

Among the 42 children studied within the 32 families that participated in the study, 12 different languages besides English were listed. Table 2 lists the languages and the frequencies, that is, the number of children who spoke the language. This provides an indication of the myriad of different languages teachers may have to deal with in their effort to understand immigrant children in their classrooms.

**TABLE 2: LANGUAGES SPOKEN AND THEIR FREQUENCIES**

| | LANGUAGE | FREQUENCY |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Spanish** | **21** |
| 2 | **Kiswahili** | **4** |
| 3 | **Japanese** | **3** |
| 4 | **Korean** | **2** |
| 5 | **Polish** | **2** |
| 6 | **Chinese** | **2** |
| 7 | **Arabic** | **2** |
| 8 | **Farsi** | **2** |
| 9 | **Bosnian** | **1** |
| 10 | **Turkish** | **1** |
| 11 | **Somali** | **1** |
| 12 | **Amhark** | **1** |
| **Total number of children** | | **42** |

Given the small sample size studied, twelve different languages indicate that there are many languages brought by immigrants and spoken in Chicago.

### *(iii) Immigrant Parents' Interactions With Their Children*

Parents interacted with their children in different ways. The activities included drawing and coloring, playing a silent game, making paper flowers, sorting beads, "making toys", going for a walk, reading, arranging books, story telling, singing a favorite song, preparing a meal, asking direct questions. The researcher grouped the parent child interactions into three categories: a. joint parent-child activities without linguistic utterances, b. joint parent-child activities with linguistic utterances, and c. parent-child utterances alone. Pearson

Correlation analysis of parent utterances (outside joint activity), parent utterances during parent-child joint activity, and child utterances indicated linear relationships to differing extents. As shown in the sample correlation matrix in Figure 2, instances of interaction during joint activities were highly correlated to child utterances. It was surprising that this correlation was higher (**r = .89**) than the correlation between parents' utterances (without joint activity) and child utterances (**r = .35**).

Figure 2 about here

### *(iv) Spontaneous Interaction at home and School-Home Linguistic Coordination*

Interviews and observations indicated that while exposure to the two languages was important for the children, what was even more important was the spontaneous use of language. Coordination of the two languages, with English being spoken more at school, and mother tongue being spoken solely at home was crucial. The families studied consisted mostly of fathers who worked outside the home, and mothers who stayed home. It happened that the fathers tended to have more education than the mothers, a quality that probably helped fathers to get paid jobs more easily. However, there was also a cultural aspect apparent from interviews that the mother was more likely to stay home irrespective of her education level. It seemed to be easier for the mother to be employed outside the home if the father was also employed.

The mothers interacted with the children more than the fathers did. It was therefore not surprising that most linguistic interaction at home was in the mother tongue, since the mothers spoke little or no English. During home visits it was found out that fathers communicated to their young children in both English and in mother tongue in spontaneous ways. The children would understand and

respond appropriately. When the response was linguistic, it was not necessarily in proficient English, or in English at all. Sometimes the child answered in a word or two in English, and sometimes completely in the mother tongue. This happened across age groups.

Information from teachers and caregivers indicated that most immigrant children spoke English to their fathers and mother tongue to their mothers. Both parents might come to pick up the child at the same time, and the child would show the father work done (e.g. a picture drawn by the child) in school while trying to describe it in English. The child would describe the same picture to the mother using the mother tongue. In three separate instances in two schools, three mothers tried to respond in English to the children as their children were proudly showing their day's work, but the children would insist on using the mother tongue to explain the work to their mothers. They considered their fathers and school as being related to English and their mothers and the home as being related to the mother tongue.

Observations and interviews revealed that the teachers played the role of linguistic coordinator between home and school more than the parents did. Even though teachers did not understand the children's first languages, they tried to help the children communicate in English when the children expressed themselves in their mother tongue. Sometimes the teacher would guess right, what the child was trying to say in the first language, and the teacher would rephrase it for the child using English.

### *(v) School Support*

School support for these linguistically challenging children was very important on a day to day basis. Availability of materials to interact with, other children from different language backgrounds, teacher aides and flexibility of the teacher were

major factors that were observed to help the immigrant children function considerably smoothly during the school day. Two children might be interacting with materials and/or manipulatives, and since they both could not speak English fluently they would communicate mostly through actions. When an English speaking child interacted with a non-English speaking child the latter lacked the words or the proficiency to respond in English, therefore a fight over toys and materials was more likely. Spanish-speaking teacher aides helped out with the Spanish-speaking children. For the other languages that neither the teacher nor the teacher aides knew, it was much more difficult to connect home and school linguistic experiences such as talking about their families, practicing polite words learned in the family language (e.g. words for "thank you", "please", "sorry", "excuse me"). It would not be correct to assume that the child's culture did not include those words, while the actual problem was that a link was missing link to cross-transfer the child's learning from home to school. The other way round was less of a problem. At home fathers could help their children practice the English words and skills learned at school.

### *(vi) Parent Sensitivity to School Support*

The immigrant parents' sensitivity to school support was affected by parents' understanding and processing of the information they received from the school about their child. It was observed that although the mother would pay keen attention to what the teachers tried to tell her in English about her child's day at school, she might not understand it well enough to do something about it. Although most of the mothers did not speak fluent English, they could understand key phrases like " drew a good picture", "was very good", "used new English words", or "fought with another child", "not happy", "refused to say 'thank you' when asked to', "did not listen to the story", etc. Spanish-speaking mothers found communication with the teacher aides much easier than with the teacher. The other mothers who did not speak English or Spanish were making little or no

sense of the support provided by the school. English classes for the parents (mostly the mothers) were conducted at one of the schools. These classes would help change the situation as the mothers acquired more English.

## 6. *Summary, Discussion and Implications for Teachers Parents and Communities*

### a. Summary of the findings

The major findings of this study were:

- Parents wanted their children to be proficient in both English and in their mother tongue.
- The children who participated in the study spoke 12 different languages (statistically, a different language for every 3.5 children).
- The more parents participated in a joint activity with their children the more the children engaged in linguistic behavior; parent utterances on their own (without a joint activity) were less likely to evoke linguistic behavior in their children.
- There was little coordination between home and school in terms of spontaneous linguistic experiences.
- School support was available to a considerable extent for the immigrant children and parents to learn English.
- There was little responsiveness to the support provided by the school

## b. Discussion and Implications

(i) The Importance of English

Parents who come from other countries perceive the English language as a tool for upward mobility in society and therefore want their children to learn it and use it proficiently. Families move from one country to another to seek better and more fulfilling life styles. Being able to communicate in the language of the host society inevitably feels as one step towards the search for better life. Mushi (1999) found that Tanzanian parents who had moved to North America with their young children perceived ability to speak English as the most important advantage for their children' exposure to North America.

However, parents find it difficult to let go of their mother tongue with their generation, and not be able to pass it down to their children within a predominantly English speaking society. According to the immigrant families studied, there was a clear-cut division between the language of the home (mother tongue) and the language of the school/success (English). The families wanted their children to be able to succeed within the American society and also live fulfilling lives within their cultures mirrored through their languages. Since it is difficult to separate language from culture, parents may feel that losing the mother tongue is losing their important cultural values.

Desiring both English and mother tongue to be maintained within the American macro culture is desiring two distinct ways of life. While this seems possible and obvious among bilingual adults, it is much more challenging for young children to maintain both languages and the embedded cultures at the same rate without strongly coordinated home and school linguistic experiences. Living the two cultures as separate worlds at a young age may send the wrong message to the children,

especially if there is conflict of values. The children may inappropriately perceive it is alright to do the culturally forbidden things at school or the school forbidden things at home. A coordinated understanding of the two cultures as expressed through language is necessary.

Bronfenbrenner'e ecological systems theory (1979, 1989, 1993) explains how the microsystem (the family, the child's immediate surroundings) is related to the mesosystesm (connection between home, school, neighborhoods). The theory presents three other levels, the exosytem (social settings with indirect effect on children), the macrosystem (the wider society, laws, customs, resources) and the chronosystem (the temporal dimension of his model). The theory purports that children's growth, learning and development are affected by a host of factors. For instance, a child's school success depends not only on what takes place in the classroom, but also on parental involvement in the school culture and the school's connection to the home. Parent-child interaction and home values will affect the child's interactions with teachers and caregivers. Teachers' and caregivers' interactions with the child will affect child-parent/family relationships. Schools and families need to work together towards the same goals. It is not enough to encourage parental involvement in their children's learning at school; the school must connect to the family to bridge the child's home and school experiences for effective learning. While home visits were aimed at this goal, they involved only some of the experiences.

(ii) Language as "Exchange of Meanings": The Power of Many Languages

It was not surprising to the researcher that twelve languages were spoken among the 32 families studied. The high rate of migration into the United States and especially to cities like Chicago brings with it many different cultures and values mirrored through language. Children of immigrants

come with some competence in their first languages, and those born of immigrant parents in the United States tend to learn their mother tongue at home. This means the children acquire values and language skills that are different from those in the macro culture of the school. The language skills and values already learned by the children of immigrants should be used as the starting point for learning the macro culture. It is counter-productive to suppress the values and the language skills already acquired. In cases of value conflicts systematic unlearning of the unwanted values will be more effective than mere suppression of those values.

Every language is a system of communication that suffices the needs of its speakers to exchange meanings. The toddlers and preschoolers were acquiring two systems to perceive and "read" the world around them and operate in it. Expression of concepts and meanings of specific skills and knowledge is better carried out and exchanged in specific languages. It is difficult to translate a concept from one language to another and not affect its original meaning. Translation interferes with the completeness of meaning. Therefore rather than trying to substitute words in one language for words in another language, effort should be made to learn the skill or concept in the language in which the skill/concept is embedded.

New knowledge and skills emerge from challenges people face as they "read" the world around them, using the invaluable tool, language. Language and thought necessarily work hand in hand; it is not possible to have one functioning effectively independent of the other. Obviously, two or more of this invaluable tool (language) are an advantage. The challenge is how to maintain the immigrants' languages and cultures with their embedded skills.

Immigrants leave their home countries and come to North America to improve their lives through education and work, which necessitate

exchange of knowledge and skills. People coming to the United States will already have skills and sufficiently developed language systems for their needs. Getting immigrants from many countries means getting many cultures, skills and languages represented in the school system and in the work place. Parents, teachers, and the school system can work together to promote effective learning and positive use of the different languages for school learning. In addition to supporting young immigrant children who already speak the languages, actual classroom instruction of different languages could be provided. Formal instruction of different languages would help bridge the linguistic-cum-psychological gap between new immigrants and the wider American society.

(iii) Joint parent-child activities attracted child's linguistic behavior

The joint parent-child activities evoked more utterances (words, phrases and sentences) in both English and mother tongue, on the part of the children than talking directly to the children. In some cases the children would talk to themselves and "observe the parents' reaction for reassurance", as they engaged in the joint activities. The joint activities included: playing with the child, preparing a meal, watching television, doing house chores, visiting friends/relatives, doing groceries, writing a letter to a friend, getting ready for school, cooking a cultural dish, talking to visitors, washing clothes, washing the baby, fixing the computer, making the bed, feeding the baby.

The positive effect of parent-child activities is a logical consequence of the use of language - to get things done (pragmatics). As the children engaged in activities that were interesting to them, they had reason to use language to express themselves, ask questions, solve problems, congratulate themselves, get reassurance from a watching parent, monitor the activity, and to state accomplishments.

(iv) Home - school linguistic connection

Effective home-school linguistic connection seemed to be minimal although teachers and caregivers would initiate interaction with a parent by providing feedback on the child's school day. Linguistic barriers between teachers and caregivers on the one hand and parents on the other were obvious. It seemed to be a challenge for the immigrant parents to fully understand feedback (on their children's learning) in English. There was no easy solution to this challenge. With time parents (especially the mothers) would probably acquire more English and this would make communication easier. Teachers, teacher aides and parents could plan a parent-child activity session to be carried out within the school where English would be spoken. These joint activities might prompt more utterances in English, for mothers as well as for the children.

**(v) Cultural Values Challenged**

In many immigrant cultures the father spends more time on his job outside the home while the mother stays home and interacts more with the children. In this study, fathers appeared to be a better linguistic link between the home and school because they were more proficient in English compared to the mothers. Fathers tended to spend more one-on-one time with their young children at home, a role culturally understood to be the mother's. There was need for fathers to make themselves more and more available to the teachers in order to get feedback about their children's learning since they understood English better. It seemed fathers could help monitor the transfer of learning between the two different linguistic contexts better than the mothers could, although the mothers spent more time at home with the children. This seemed as a cultural challenge to immigrant fathers. However, they seemed to naturally

take this role. It would have been interesting to find out what immigrant mothers thought about this twist of cultural roles.

### (vi) The Importance of Immigrant Communities

It was observed during the home visits that families that spoke the same language or similar languages knew one another and in some cases lived within the same sub-community. These small communities appeared to be the only available socio-inguistic links to the children's spontaneous learning of their mother tongue. With financial and organizational support these communities can play an invaluable role in helping children learn and maintain their first language and culture instead of putting this complex and demanding task on the already overwhelmed school system. In the early years, language learning is more effective if it is acquired spontaneously.

The families can be helped to organize picnics, visitations, games or other cultural functions to promote cultural learning, which can not be provided at school. Moreover, within the cultural functions parents can include activities related to school values, requirements and exercises that promote school learning, such as spelling contests, self expression games, reading, drawing and coloring, writing, interpersonal skills. The children will have opportunities to see that school and home are not entirely dichotomous contexts after all. In their later schooling years the children can take part in formal classroom instruction of their native languages, if they are offered.

## 7. Concluding Remarks and Further Research

This study was an eye opener to the researcher and hopefully to readers with regard to the complexity of factors that come to play in trying to help young children from immigrant families acquire English and their first language effectively. Parent involvement in their young children's education is invaluable, and so is the effort to connect school learning to the child's home experiences. Parents' motivation to have their children learn both English and the first language effectively, is an important first step towards helping these immigrant families and especially the young children learn effectively in school. Formal classroom instruction of the different languages will be an additional means to strengthen the linguistic fiber of the American society. As a cognitive process, language learning stimulates the intellect. By effectively learning and using two or more languages Americans will acquire and develop the intellectual rewards embedded in competence in multiple languages.

Based on the study the researcher recommends further research in four important areas to answer fundamental questions arising from the experience of this study:

a. What strategies do teachers use in the classroom to communicate with immigrant children who do not speak English when there are no teacher aides who speak the child's language? How do teachers ensure effective interaction and meaningful learning?
b. In what ways do immigrant families (parents and older siblings) help the school system in the effort to educate immigrant, non-English speaking children? How have immigrant parents' roles changed within the family and what impact does this change have on the family and on the children's learning?

c. What approaches do other countries use to teach English effectively at a young age? What types of programs help the children become truly multilingual and function academically and effectively in different languages?

d. What factors need to be considered in teaching multiple languages in American school systems?

Further research seeking answers to these questions will throw some light on how best to tap the linguistic, cultural, and therefore intellectual resources this country (United States) is continuously being given by history.

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**Figure 1: Parents' Preference for English and Mother Tongue (L1)**

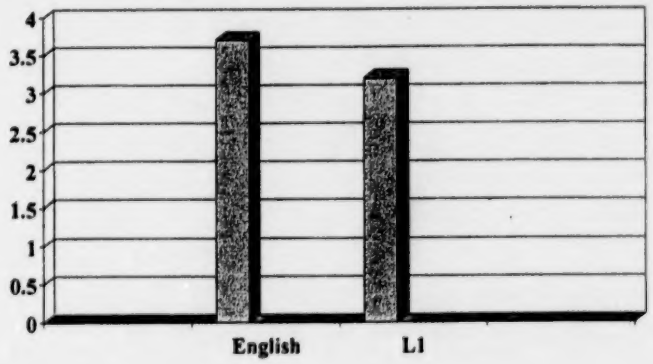

**FIGURE 2: A CORRELATION MATRIX**

| | Column 1 | Column 2 | Column 3 | Column 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Column 1 | 1 | | | |
| Column 2 | 0.3548942245152 | 1 | | |
| Column 3 | 0.2546257527978 | 0.89643086368181 | 1 | |
| Column 4 | 0.1610272594352 | 0.63425598651507 | 0.73728408 | 1 |

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**The Correlation Matrix shows higher correlation between joint parent-child activity and child's utterances (.89) compared to parent utterances alone and child's utterances (.35).**

**Key: The columns correlated contained:**

**Column 1: =number of parent utterances (without joint activity)**
**Column 2: =number of joint parent-child activities**
**Column 3: =number of child's utterances**
**Column 4: =number of new words (not discussed in this study).**